

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH BRIGADIER
GENERAL

KEVIN
BERGNER, DEPUTY CHIEF OF STAFF FOR STRATEGIC EFFECTS,
MULTINATIONAL
FORCE
IRAQ; (VIA TELECONFERENCE)

MODERATOR: JACK HOLT

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MR. HOLT: And who just joined us?

GEN. BERGNER: Hi. I'm Kevin Bergner.

MR. HOLT: Ah, yes, sir. How are you today, sir?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm well. Who's this?

MR. HOLT: This is Jack Holt. I'm with the OSD Bloggers Roundtable.

GEN. BERGNER: Hi, Jack.

MR. HOLT: And we've still got a few folks gathering up here. Somebody else just joined us. Who is that?

Q That's Grim from Blackfive.

MR. HOLT: All right, Grim.

Sir, I suppose we can probably get started. And let's see here. We should have -- we may have a few more folks joining us here as we move on. But we've got quite a few here just to kind of get us started.

With us today on the Bloggers Roundtable: Brigadier General Kevin Bergner, the deputy chief of staff for Strategic Effects, Multinational Force Iraq.

General Bergner, thanks for being with us this morning.

GEN. BERGNER: Jack, glad to do it. And just so I know who we're chatting with, do you have some sense of who's on?

MR. HOLT: Yes, sir. We've got Andrew Lubin, with ON Point --

GEN. BERGNER: Okay.

MR. HOLT: -- and David Axe with the -- (chuckles) -- David, are you there?

Q Yes.

MR. HOLT: I've totally spaced your blog site.

Q Yeah.

MR. HOLT: DANGER --

Q DANGER ROOM.

MR. HOLT: DANGER ROOM. That's it. (Chuckles.) Sorry about that.

We've got Michael Goldfarb with the Weekly Standard. And Austin Bay is on with us, and Grim from Blackfive.

GEN. BERGNER: Hey, Grim.

MR. HOLT: So that's who we've got to begin with here, and we've still got a few that said that they wanted to join us. We'll see if they can --

GEN. BERGNER: Is that the same Austin Bay that I might have worked with at the military academy at some point in time -- (inaudible) --

Q When I was a colonel and you were a lieutenant colonel? You bet.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, how are you?

Q It was not the military academy. It was at TRADOC.

GEN. BERGNER: That's right. It was TRADOC. You used to do Army After Next support.

Q That's right. You know, working on spring war games with the chief of staff. I also did a tour there working on a special project with Colonel Rios (sp). So -- that was 2000, just --

GEN. BERGNER: A long -- and a long way since then. Well, it's good to hear your voice.

Q Just before you made full bull.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. And my wife was amazed at that. So you can imagine where she is now --

Q Well, there you go! She's doubly amazed.

How are you doing?

GEN. BERGNER: I'm well, thanks. It's good to hear your voice. You did some great work for us back then. It was very impressive.

Q Well, thanks. Well, let's see how good my work is after I pop a question on you.

GEN. BERGNER: (Chuckles.) Okay.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) All right. And somebody else just joined us. Who is that?

Q This is Charlie Quidnunc.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, Charlie. Okay. Charlie Quidnunc with Whizbang Podcast. All right.

So, General, if you've got an opening statement, we can get started.

GEN. BERGNER: Okay. I will, Jack. Let me just say a couple of things.

First, there has been -- I think you have all been tracking this attack at the al-Mansour Hotel. Prime Minister Maliki's been out there with a very strong statement condemning it, as have we.

It's interesting to point out that this was both Sunnis and Shi'a who were killed in that attack. And there was some early speculation as to whether or not this was something other than an al Qaeda attack, and there is absolutely no basis of evidence to support anything other than this was an al Qaeda-sponsored attack.

In fact, they have since publicly come out and claimed responsibility for it. So I've been asked by several folks, in the Arab media particularly, whether there was -- this was some other sponsorship or intent here. And the facts say, this was clearly an al Qaeda-related effort.

We're in day 12 of the surge of operations here under Multinational Corps's Operation Phantom Thunder which, you know, is about intensifying the offensive effort both in Baghdad and around

Baghdad simultaneously. General Odierno has been out with a pretty detailed update that he gave last Friday on the overall operation, and Rick Lynch on Sunday provided a detailed update on the Baghdad -- I'm sorry, the south of Baghdad operation. And then Monday, Brigadier General Mick Bednarek, who is one of the DCGs for MND-North, provided a good update on the operations north of Baghdad.

So really I would just point you to those briefings and those presentations if you haven't seen them yet. They're worth taking a look at. All three of them and the rest of us have been out there trying to remind people that progress will not come overnight. This is not going to be like turning on a light switch. It will be much more gradual, and it will occasionally come with setbacks.

There has been one thing that I'd point out to you today that we've released this afternoon. Coalition forces, on the 23rd of June, killed two senior al Qaeda operatives that were operating in Northern Iraq and facilitating a foreign fighter cell that was moving al Qaeda-sponsored foreign fighters into Iraq. The two people that were killed are -- (name inaudible) -- who was also known as Khalid al-Turki (sp). He is the guy that was heading up this cell focused on foreign fighters. He interestingly enough was someone who had fought in Afghanistan in 2001. He is someone who re-established his operations here in Iraq, we think, sometime within the past year and is somebody who actually associated with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the masterminds behind the 9/11 attacks. So that gives you a frame of reference of what circles he was associated with. He was accompanied by -- (name inaudible) -- who was also known as Khalil al-Turki (sp), a courier for the same al Qaeda cell and a close associate of some of the other leaders within al Qaeda -- so two pretty senior al Qaeda figures removed from the scene as a result of good, focused operations in Northern Iraq.

I will be glad to address specific questions on Baqubah or Anbar, Baghdad, Mosul or Babil province with MND-Center or any other

operations. I would say that one of the things we've seen in the last few days, and kind of a cumulative result of the first 10 or 12 days of this operation, is a pattern of finding the facilities, the operating bases, that al Qaeda and other extremists have been operating from in Iraq.

In Baqubah, you've heard some of that. You've heard of houses that have been used for executions and illegal prison, a weapons cache -- a number of weapons caches -- houses wired for -- with bombs. And just the other day, we continued that same pattern. We found a weapons

cache of rocket-propelled grenades, other munitions, an al Qaeda weapons cache, a car wired, ready to go outside.

So what we're seeing is an array of facilities that are established specifically to operate from, launch spectacular attacks from and solidify their control over the neighborhood in which they're established.

In Anbar, one of the interesting discoveries they made in the last few days was a house, it was an IED factory, with 66 pressure plate or speed-bump IEDs, as we sometimes call them, in a 10 by 20-foot room that was filled to about waist high with homemade explosives and all the other necessary bomb-making components. So a pretty good pattern of being able to get after some of these former safe havens and reduce them.

Iraqi security forces, I think there have been some questions lately about, you know, are there enough, how many are there, and one of the things that's worth noting that's not out there very much is they're turning out about 7,500 soldiers every five weeks from their institutional training base now, the Iraqis are. And with the confluence of some other -- some basic training courses that are going to graduate between now and the 9th of July, we'll see something in the range of about 10,300 new soldiers take their place in the army. So there is a pipeline that's working to keep pace with the need for the ISF to expand and get more present for duty showing up, and at the same time expanding the number of units that are available to fill in behind these security operations. So a work in progress there.

My last point to you is, I went downtown a few days ago to visit a joint security station in Adhamiya. I took three members of the Council of Representatives with me as a way to help facilitate their overwatch of security and kind of a little bit of a codel, I guess, to go see their soldiers and talk to their security leaders. And I served here in 2005 and had a certain perspective on Iraqi police and Iraqi army based on my experience then, and what I saw in this joint security station was interesting in that this Iraqi army battalion commander and the Iraqi police commander that I worked with that day were absolutely linked and working together.

And Lieutenant Colonel Al Shaffner (sp), who commands the artillery battalion that supports that operation there, it was just an absolute impressive collaboration, team work on all their parts. So a pretty good teamwork and integration of effort there at at least one joint security station, which I think is probably fairly representative.

And that's sort of my update or kind of an overview for you, and I'll be glad to address your specific questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you, General.

Andrew, why don't you get us started.

Q General, good afternoon. Andrew Lubin here from ON Point. Appreciate taking the time. I'd like to go back to your comments with -- to follow up on General Bednarek's statement over the weekend. You know, he indicated that the IAs are also short of weapons, ammunition, uniforms and radios. I appreciate they're putting out new people every five weeks, but are we putting people out to be unarmed and ill-equipped? And if so, can you fill us in on this?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, that's a work in progress too. And, you know, Mick Bednarek knows better than anybody because he's on the ground and seeing exactly what he's got and what they've got. Sometimes it's not clear exactly whether that's a function of the equipping effort or if that's a function of the leadership effort there on the Iraqi side with some of those units in terms of having what they're supposed to have and bringing what they're supposed to have with them.

Q But if they've got that, are you able to reach out to them and say, whoops, you've got to these people equipped, like, yesterday? Because five weeks is -- like General Bednarek said, we need people -- we need them now to secure what we've got.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. And I don't want to diminish the sense of urgency that we feel when a tactical commander or a deputy commander like Mick comes up on the Net. That's something we take very seriously. And you can imagine that General Dubik and the MNSTC-I team are all over that. So I don't know that it's a -- I think it's one of those things we're addressing where it happens there, but there are other places where you'll see -- like I will tell you at JSS Salake (ph), I was stunned by the uniformity of what I saw -- Iraqi soldiers in the right uniform, right gear, good radio coms. Same

thing I saw when I went to Ramadi, actually, and I saw Iraqi police with (brick ?) radios, right body armor, weapons and so forth.

So there is -- I'm sure -- you know that there is an unevenness to that effort here, and sometimes it's a result of different factors. Sometimes it could be the unit, sometimes it can be the institution. Bottom line is we just need to fix it as quickly as we see it.

Q But sir, General Lynch kind of confirmed it and said the same thing. It seems to be more an institutional failing than an individual unit failing.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, the places that he's operating down south, I think, are places where the Iraqi police and -- particularly the Iraqi police have not had as much interaction with their own police institution or the coalition. So what we're seeing there is a need to both fill in what has been an absence and at the same time build new forces that can quickly fill in behind ours. So I'm not suggesting at all it's not something we're working on. We are.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: And Mike Goldfarb.

Q Yes, sir. I'm going to just pass and soak it all in here.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Very good. Austin.

Q General Bergner, your job is strategic effects. There are two timelines running, one in Iraq, one in Washington. I'm just going to point out there was an article I wrote for the Weekly Standard in 2005 where I quoted the C-9 of Multinational Corps Iraq talking about confronting the political whipsaw in the United States. Earlier this week Senator Lugar -- and I'm not going to ask this as a political question, I'm asking this really as a strategic question -- he implied that he might be for withdrawal. And he's been a strong supporter of the effort in Iraq.

What would you say strategically as a senior officer to people in the U.S. that are operating on what we'll either call the Washington or the U.S. political cycle timeline in regards to the new coalition effort in Iraq?

What should they look for? What should they do?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, let me kind of put it this way, Austin.

I think everybody accepts that there are two clocks, and General Petraeus has talked about it a number of times. And it's just the reality, and it's the strategic reality that we're now dealing with. The effort that's underway now with this surge of operations, with expanded pressure and simultaneous pressure both in Baghdad and in the surrounding areas, to help secure Baghdad, are specifically to help

create better conditions for the political process and the other legislative steps to be taken, because we all know that there needs to be a little bit better opportunity for that to happen.

So, I mean, I guess, what I'm trying to tell you is, we understand the difference in clocks. To those of us that are serving here, our focus is not on the clocks. Our focus is on making this surge of operations achieve the best possible effect that we can and working with the Iraqis, because they are at the center of that responsibility.

What I've seen is that the Iraqis, both at the political level and certainly at the military level, they understand that. They understand that -- and they want progress at least as much as anybody else does. So they are not unmotivated and they are not uninformed about the time differences. The Iraqi forces are concerned about it, I guess, in the sense that, you know, they have a good relationship with us. They appreciate the partnership that we bring to them. And so, you know, they want that to continue and they want to be able to grow and continue to partner with us.

So, I guess, my point to you is, I think, people here get that and both -- most importantly on the Iraqi side but also, it's just the reality that we're operating in.

Q Well, look the reason I ask is because I'm trying to project 10 years into the future, if I was going to write this as a history, and looking at -- you know, there are all kinds of operational and tactical issues, but -- and I know it's a tough question. It's -- but I don't mean to ask it at all unfairly. Because that is the -- that's a strategic bind, and your answer recognizes that.

So I appreciate it. Thank you.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah.

MR. HOLT: Grim with Black Five.

Q Sir, I was reading David Kilcullen's post yesterday. You probably -- I don't know that you would've had time to read it, given that you have many other things to do. But he had written on sort of how we can judge progress in the next weeks or months. Would you like to make some comments along that line, of things that you would like folks in the U.S. to be looking for, so that we can make an informed decision about how well the new tactics are working, how well the new

strategies are working?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, that's -- one of the nice parts about these conference calls is, I find out from you guys what I need to go read if I haven't already read it. So I will pull David Kilcullen's good post from the other day and make sure I give it a good look.

You know that we've only been at this surge of operations now for about 12 days and we've all said, it's going to take a period of weeks and months to really see the effect of that being achieved. So it's really early to be making predictions, assessments or judgments, and I will not seek to do that. There are some things that we know are what we're in search of.

And the purpose of these operations is really centered on improving population security, creating that linkage between the Iraqi forces and the people, the citizens in these neighborhoods, and connecting them with their government -- sort of a three-legged stool: the government, the people and their forces.

When the people in these neighborhoods respect and have some confidence in their security forces, you create a very important dynamic. When the security forces are accountable and responsible and reporting to their government, that's an important accountability issue. And when the people see that both their government and their security forces are working on their behalf to improve not just their security but the economic conditions, the provision of essential services on a consistent and equitable basis to all Iraqis, then you really have the most enduring circumstance where trust and capability have come together. And that's what these operations are trying to create the conditions to achieve.

So that's not something that you can measure very quickly. It's one of those things that takes time to build, and it's one of those things that takes time to solidify once you've got it in place so that it becomes more resilient. But you have to improve population security first in order for that to have the prospects of moving forward.

So I think that's kind of a broad answer of what we're -- what progress needs to be achieved.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, thank you, sir.

Charlie Quidnunc.

Q Yes, General, this is Charlie Quidnunc with Whizbang. My question deals with success that we had in Anbar. We seem to be turning the population to our side. How does this latest surge, where we've got 10,000 people out there fighting, how does that turn the Iraqi people towards us, and how do we choose between kinetic actions and just conversations with the population?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Well, you know, there are no one-size-fits-all solutions over here. Iraq is very much a mosaic, and so in answering your question, it's really different depending on where you go and how much progress has been achieved in different places.

In Anbar, what you saw was initially a coalition bridge that helped get these sheikhs talking and communicating more with the security forces, and then eventually the government of Iraq interacting with that. And if you talk to Sheikh Sattar and some of

the other leaders out there, they're very appreciative of the coalition's effort, they've very supportive of it.

But ultimately, whether it's in Anbar or whether it's in Amiriyah or Babil province or Baqubah, the solutions here are Iraqi solutions, and so we're not trying to -- we know that we need to facilitate the Iraqi progress in the areas that I talked about a moment ago. And when we've gone into some of these places, if you talk to Rick Lynch or Mick Bednarek, they would both tell you that the Iraqi people frequently say we are glad you're here, we appreciate your helping us. There is a willingness to work with the coalition and the Iraqi security forces partnered up.

So we know that this ultimately has to be an Iraqi result, and we're working hard to help them achieve that, but not at the expense of them being the ones that achieve it -- (short pause) -- if that makes sense to you. We're trying to make them -- we're trying to put them in a position where they can succeed is what I'm trying to say.

Q But what you're saying is it's not one-size-fits-all, that in some places you're better off going in there with guns blazing, and some places you're better off -- (audio break) -- with the sheikhs.

GEN. BERGNER: Well, that's right. In some places where the irreconcilables have taken root, there is not a lot of room for dialogue, and so it is very much an offensive, tactical operation.

In other places, you can go in and talk with the sheikhs, and -- either we can or the Iraqi forces can to achieve a different result. In some places, it takes a little bit of kinetic operation to create the conditions for that dialogue to take place, and then in other places, it takes much more kinetic operation because of the depth of the irreconcilables that are in those places.

So you're exactly right, it is not a one-size-fits-all, and we understand that. But we're willing to use all of those tools as a part of this operation, so it's not strictly a kinetic one. In fact, one of the things we're working the hardest on right now in Diyala is to make sure that food, fuel, water, all of those provisions -- the Iraqi government is gearing up and getting them up ready so that they can flow in and show a tangible improvement in the neighborhoods that are improved. So multifaceted, multidimensional in terms of levels of effort, too.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, General. We've just got -- just a few minutes left here. Anybody have any follow-up questions?

Q Yes, I do. I do, if we have time, Jack. General, Andrew Lubin again.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew.

Q Great. Thanks. I feel like -- sometimes like I'm the heavy, ask all these ugly questions.

But Colonel Steve Townsend from the 3rd Stryker Brigade is quoted as saying that a lot of the guys he was after escaped early, and then that two of them escaped right towards -- right before the offensive started, because there was a leak of information from -- from the coalition, perhaps. Can you comment on this and then what we're doing to chase these people down?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, the issue here is not one that I would take, you know, any different perspective than Steve Townsend's. He's the Stryker brigade commander on the ground, and there's no better spokesperson for what's going on there.

So -- I will say that the level of effort that's now available to the coalition is different, certainly. And that difference gives us more options in terms of pursuing, in terms of repositioning, in terms of staying longer in the places that we are now.

And so the combination of those three things, I think, is how we deal with the problem of these guys who have departed, perhaps before operations have been able to roll them up.

The other interesting point on this is, you will see a pattern of al Qaeda leaders who come into a place, they organize these fighters, and then as the -- as things get cranked up, they're the ones that leave. And they leave these fighters behind. And it's a little bit of a statement about the nature of the enemy. It's one of those things that over time will have a corrosive effect on the insurgency and on the nature of al Qaeda's -- how al Qaeda is viewed here.

Q Okay. Do you know -- and not that you want -- we're going to ask -- but do you know who these people are? I mean, are we -- are you able to target specific AQI leaders who are doing this?

GEN. BERGNER: We have good intelligence on the leadership structures in many places. We have a good system in place to share that and fuse that intelligence across units. And so there is a very coherent effort that's about identifying them, targeting them and then moving against them. And it's not dependent upon a surge in one place or another. It's something that works across the board.

So I mean, that's how you get people like Khalid al-Turki (sp) and these other guys who are operating all across Iraq.

Q Great. Thank you.

Q Jack, I have another question.

MR. HOLT: Sure.

Q Follow-up, really, on that one, then. General Bergner, has intelligence from the Iraqi people noticeably improved in -- since February or March, when really the initial stages of the surge began?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah, Austin, our commanders tell us across the board that the number of tips they receive from the Iraqi people continue to increase, and it's not surprising. It's really just common sense. Once you're in these neighborhoods and once you're established, people will have a sense of trust in you because you're there all the time and they know that you're there patrolling and operating to secure them. And so they will -- may be inclined to share that information with you, once you've established that you'll act on it, and it ultimately results in improving their security.

So we have seen more intelligence coming from the community. We have seen more tips. And I think most importantly, you see an increasing trust between the Iraqi forces and the people in these neighborhoods, and that's one that takes time, because in some cases they come from outside those neighborhoods. They're not indigenous forces; they're from that province.

Q And how do you leverage that, which is improving communication both with the security forces and with you -- how is the Iraqi government leveraging that into building political confidence? Are they doing it? Are there programs for that?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, it's interesting. You know, Prime Minister Maliki has been very public in the last week about promoting the awakening beyond Anbar, the awakening in all the different provinces and encouraging both tribal and provincial leaders to come forward and find the political courage to work with their provincial government and with the central government. And he has been very open in encouraging that dialogue between tribes and the government at both levels.

The other way that that takes root is with things like Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih convening an economic forum specifically to help build the mechanisms necessary for Anbar province to get their budget in and get their request for services and everything else quantified, which we saw just last week. Barham Salih along with the governor of Anbar did that.

It also is helped by things like a trip down to a joint security station, which these three members of the Council of Representatives did, to talk with their security force leaders and to expand on the security teamwork that was in place.

So we do see it. You see it at both the national and provincial level, you see it directly encouraged by Prime Minister Maliki, and

then you see the initiatives that Council of Representatives members are taking to get out and go make contact and try to encourage further progress.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much. Brigadier General Kevin Bergner with us, the deputy chief of staff for Strategic Effects on the Bloggers Roundtable today. Sir, we'll be looking forward to having you back.

Have you got any closing comments, final thoughts?

GEN. BERGNER: Well, I would just tell you all, thanks for what you're doing and for this interaction. It helps us understand a little bit better what the issues and perspectives are out there. As I mentioned to you, it helps me figure out what I need to go read that sometimes I haven't found on my own yet. But you also do an important job in helping share the story and kind of provide an informed perspective on what's going on, so all of us serving over here appreciate what you do in that regard.

So that's it. We wish you a happy 4th of July, if we don't talk to you before then.

Q Well, General, thank you for the time.

Q Thanks a lot, Kevin.

GEN. BERGNER: Thank you, sir.

Hey, Jack?

MR. HOLT: Yes?

GEN. BERGNER: Great show. Thanks.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Thank you, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Great stuff, great stuff.

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END